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MEDIA CONTACTS
Jared Touchin | 928.221.9253
Jolene Holgate | 928.308.4174
Chrissy Largo | 928.637.5603
nnlb.communications@gmail.com

Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approves \$200,000 for the Navajo Air Transportation Department

WINDOW ROCK – On Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approved Legislation No. 0043-14, approving supplemental funding from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance in the amount of \$200,000 for the Navajo Air Transportation Department to maintain aging aircraft fleet and to purchase jet fuel.

According to the Supplemental Funding Proposal Summary submitted by Air Transportation Director Joe Berardesco, the Nation owns two 29 year-old Beeschcraft King Airs aircrafts that are in need of maintenance to comply with standards governed by the Federal Aviation Administration Regulations.

“The way the [proprietary] account is set up is we maintain the airplanes and we buy fuel. If we have a lot of revenue coming in, it’s a break even account,” stated Barardesco. “When revenue goes down, our propriety funds go down as well.”

Proprietary Funds are used for government business-type activities which are later recovered by fees charged to those who use their services.

Whether the aircraft is in use or not, the department is still incurs to calendar costs due to periodic inspections that are required on all aircrafts.

“Within one week, how many airplanes are out in the air working?” asked HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels).

Barardesco explained that there usually two planes in use even though there is a shortage of pilots and staff.

According to a memo dated Nov. 12, 2013, the Air Transportation Department spent approximately \$200,000 on expenses associated with maintaining aging aircraft since the start of FY 2014.

“Every year, costs go up and our planes get older. They are almost 30 years old. So now the cost of fuel and repairs, parts and engines are sky high. We do need some help with this amount of money that we are requesting,” stated Division Director of Division of General Services, Virgil Brown.

The funding shortfall could result in a shutdown of air transportation services to the entire Navajo Nation government in the near future according to the Supplemental Funding Proposal Summary.

“Right now we have three airplanes, and it works out well. But, if you got one plane, you still got to do your scheduling maintenance out of a 12-month period and within that timeframe, 4 months is accounted for repairs and maintenance. One plane is not going to cut it,” stated Barardesco, while also noting that the Navajo Air Transportation has saved \$300,000 by performing in-house maintenance on the aircraft.

“I can certainly see your need for the \$100,000 to work on the repair maintenance of the aircrafts but the request for \$100,000 for fuel, to me, seems very suspect. You charge the Nation for flights to Phoenix and many other places, and account for the fuel costs, but are you going to reduce the cost? How is this going to benefit at the expense of the Nation’s funds?” asked Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill).

Barardesco refuted that although the department does charge for fuel, their flights are still down by 50% and flying about 600 hours a year compared to 1200 hours a year.

“Our fuel is maintained from the propriety fund. It costs so much money with the aging aircraft issues on maintenance that last year our propriety fund decreased. That basically came out of buying fuel and maintenance on the aircraft. Every year, I hear about budget cuts and cutting back on travel, but we are still flying a lot. So the need is there,” stated Barardesco.

HEHSC members approved the legislation with a vote of 2-1.

Legislation No. 0043-14 now goes to the BFC for consideration.

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